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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 000584

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SUBJECT: ABDULLAH REFLECTS ON HIS COALITION, NATIONAL ISSUES

REF: KABUL 3961

Classified By: Ambassador K. Eikenberry reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Former presidential candidate Dr. Abdullah recently shared with the Ambassador his perspectives on the need for independent electoral bodies, the security situation, and the mixed messages the Afghan people are receiving on reconciliation and reintegration. While Abdullah said he is organizing a political movement called the Coalition for Hope and Change, separately many of his followers voice concern that supporters are slowly abandoning him in favor of Karzai because of promises of jobs and money.

The opposition remains fragmented (reftel), as key Abdullah backers Professor Rabbani and Speaker Qanooni opt to keep their own parties instead of merging under Abdullah's coalition. End Summary.

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(Loose) Coalition for Hope and Change?  
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¶2. (C) At a breakfast hosted by Ambassador Eikenberry on February 15, Abdullah said that he had formed the Leadership Secretariat of his Coalition for Hope and Change (CHC) political movement, but had deliberately avoided large media announcements in order to stay off the government's radar screen and avoid potential blow-back. He said that the coalition would become a political party in the long-term, but that it was too early to ask "others" to dissolve their parties. He said this group had identified the MPs they would support in the 2010 election (separately, Abdullah told PolOff they hoped to double their number of MPs from 50 to 100, if the elections were "somewhat fair"). He claimed to represent an ethnically diverse group that supports moderate Islamic ideals, electoral reform, and a move to a Parliamentary system. As in previous meetings, Abdullah warned that Karzai wants to run for a third term, if not in person, then one of his "entrepreneurial" brothers would since "politics is more profitable than business in Afghanistan."

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ECC Independence is Essential  
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¶3. (C) Regarding electoral reforms, Abdullah told the Ambassador that the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) "saved Afghanistan" in the last election, and their ongoing independence is critical to Afghanistan's long-term stability and the Afghan people's faith in democratic processes. He believed that those who supported transparent elections would stand up against the nationalization of the ECC. (Note: Contrarily, and reflecting the views of many pro-Karzai political parties, Hezb-e-Islami (HIA) Afghanistan chairman Arghandewal has told us that his party is "flexible" on electoral reform, and supports the nationalization of the ECC; however he would "support what the USG supported." End Note.)

¶4. (C) Dr. Abdullah opined that Afghans need a psychological boost that ensures the tide is turning away from the Taliban and thought that perhaps the Marjah offensive would provide this. He noted that although this was a joint offensive, Afghans believe it is led by NATO, not by the Afghan government. Since Afghan leadership on security issues is a new phenomenon, it would take time for the Afghan media and others to shift their mentality and reporting. He also opined that Kandahar's security issues were mafia and politically driven more than they were about the insurgency, adding also that the situation in Baghlan and Kunduz had improved recently. Abdullah did express concern, however, that Nusratan Province is falling under insurgent sway. He said the Pakistanis were still "undecided" on whether or not to crack down on the Afghan Taliban, but if they could be convinced, it would be key to a secure Afghanistan.

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"Confusion" over Reintegration and Reconciliation  
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¶5. (C) Abdullah claimed many Afghans were confused about the recent calls for reconciliation and reintegration with insurgents, since the policy thus far was vague. He complained that the Afghan people have not been consulted, yet the international community has already established a fund to support these programs, further adding to the

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confusion. He said reconciliation with the help of the Saudis is unrealistic, since they will not assist in negotiations unless the Taliban disassociates itself from Al Qaeda, something Mullah Omar will never do. Further, Karzai's emphasis on reconciliation was an attempt to shift the focus from the calls to improve governance. According to Abdullah, Upper House Speaker Mojadeddi's reconciliation program had only offered amnesty to insurgents that used their newfound freedom to help insurgents carry out new attacks with impunity.

¶6. (C) Abdullah voiced concern that many Afghans fear the government plans to "Pashtunize" the government, claiming that the Education Minister Farooq Wardak's Deputy Ministers and ten office directors were all Pashtun, which allowed one ethnicity to control the education of all Afghans. He said the Grand Peace Jirga could close the gap between the government and the people on this issue, but he was pessimistic that Karzai would adequately capitalize on this opportunity.

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Comment  
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¶7. (C) In separate meetings with opposition leaders, it has become clear that the opposition remains fragmented. United Front Spokesperson Sayeed Aqa Hussain Sancharaki recently told us that Abdullah's CHC would replace the United Front. However, Professor Rabbani's son Salahuddin said that while Professor Rabbani's Jamiat party supported the CHC in principal, they still had their own party. The most outspoken Abdullah MPs in Parliament Sardar Rahman Oghly (Uzbek, Faryab) and Ahmad Behzad (Tajik, Herat) are concerned that many Abdullah-supporters are slowly jumping ship in favor of Karzai's promises of jobs and money. According to Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) Chairman and Economics Minister Arghandehwal, because Professor Rabbani is "both in and out of the government," he is further dividing the Tajiks and weakening Abdullah's influence. The political adviser to former warlord and fundamentalist party leader Sayaf claims that Karzai's goal to divide the Tajiks is working,

especially with influential Tajik/First Vice President Fahim Khan in the government.

¶ 8. (C) Although Abdullah's opposition movement will likely remain fragmented, it can still contribute to an important and healthy public debate over reconciliation, reintegration, transitional justice, and the need for electoral reform. He also claims to aspire to form an inclusive all ethnic, all national movement. However, Abdullah's commitment to forming a real political opposition remains unconvincing. He told us during the Presidential election that he had sacrificed his comfortable pre-elections life of speaking engagements in world capitals for the sake of his country, yet he is frequently out of country. Nonetheless, Abdullah remains a key opposition figure, and as President Karzai moves to further consolidate his power, including possibly nationalizing the ECC and attempting to stack the next Parliament in his favor, these opposition voices, however disjointed, remain important. End Comment.

Eikenberry